

## Michael Tippett (1905-1998)

### Symphony No. I (1944-45)

I. Allegro vigoroso: quasi alla breve

II. Adagio

III. Presto

IV. Allegro moderato ma con brio e piu tarde con delicatezza

Tippett's first symphony was conceived, pondered, and written down in war-time. Much of it developed in Tippett's mind while he was serving a prison sentence as a conscientious objector. Yet it is a symphony that is far from the respective balm and horrors of Vaughan Williams 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> (1943 and 1946), and a world away from Shostakovich's Leningrad symphony (1941), which is practically a dispatch from the front. Tippett had tried his hand at a symphony in 1933, dismissed the result as too derivative of Sibelius, and attempted in his first official symphonic effort to use the influences of Purcell and the Elizabethan pavane in order to rejuvenate British musical achievement in the form (which he didn't think much furthered by Walton's first offering). It is a symphony that both relies upon and challenges the Beethovenian model, and consciously set out to burst with thrilling energy and vibrancy: 'I had hoped to... write a real symphony, big and strong and unintimate'. Yet its ending is decidedly ambiguous, and its slow movement one of harrowing disjuncture.

The symphony's technical accomplishment and ambition belies its status as an early work: only a handful of smaller-scale compositions had gone before, including the *Concerto for Double String Orchestra* (1938-9), whose fugal texture this symphony often recalls. But Tippett was by no means an established figure and, after Malcolm Sargeant conducted the first performance, in Liverpool, it took two years to organise the London premiere, under Walter Goehr, who said on receiving the score 'But this is a real symphony!'

The first movement is one of severe counterpoint, and there are no fewer than six thematic groups. Tippett sets up little contrast between each, other than two brief moments of lush strings. Climax is achieved not through lyricism but in brief rewards of unison playing amidst the complex tapestry.

It is with the slow movement that the symphony comes into its own. It emerges out of the deep, with a sonorous, low-string introduction that becomes a Purcellian ground-bass: the movement is a twisted 'Passacaglia' (literally a 'walk in the street', describing the repeated tread of a bass ostinato, perhaps shod here in hobnailed boots). Tippett's innovation is to have the bass-line not supporting the variations above but rhythmically and harmonically disrupting them. Resisting as best they can, voices drift out of the mist - a mournful clarinet solo (played at the London premiere by Reginald Kell); a falsely soothing flute trio - but the intensity that builds is agonizingly plunged into disunity.

The third movement is a Beethovenian Scherzo and Trio, a one-in-a-bar eruption whose particular rhythm (that of placing a strong accent on the first note of each bar) Tippett found not only from Beethoven's scherzos but from mediaeval plainsong. Different building blocks of music are organised side-by-side, foreshadowing the mosaic techniques of Tippett's later work, and punctuated by vertiginous rushes from the full orchestra. The Scherzo pauses temporarily for the Trio, a dense, silvery pavane in the strings.

Another great innovation comes in the final movement, which does not *contain* a fugue (as would be more usual): it *is*, from start to finish, a whirling dance of a double fugue that shoots the orchestra through, between, above and below the bar lines with astonishing momentum, before

spinning out and away, the strings dancing joyously off into the distance in glimmering trills far above the stave.

Is there something sinister in those pounding, bass-drum, beats that are left behind? What war-like noise is this? Tippett wrote the symphony on a piano whose keys had all lost their ivory in a recent bomb-blast. A bomb had killed the young woman who was renting out a pair of cottages Tippett owned. His father died in 1944, having been badly injured in a raid the year before. For all the work's energetic and ebullient attempt to dance the symphony back into the British concert hall, Tippett wrote to the piano's owner 'I dare say it sprang more than I knew from the experiences of a general catastrophe'.

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